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CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE: AN EXPLORATION OF ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

In the last decade, nearly every phase of art practice including production and dissemination has been changing or has already changed. Numerous conferences and publications have been focused on this theme, this presentation is based mostly on personal observations gained via independent curatorial practice. According to my experience the changing paradigms include:

- Research in the arts
- Interdisciplinary collaborations
- Art production including hybrid projects
- Changing curatorial roles
- The impact of digital technologies:
Altered presentation and dissemination modes

Research in the arts

A couple decades ago, the term “research” indicated investigations mostly limited to the field of bioscience, engineering or economics. There were very few exceptions. Lately, these long established presumptions have been challenged and it has been recognized that research has significant implications for art, design and by extension for culture. Today, research forms an

integral recognized part of contemporary art practice particularly involving interdisciplinary collaborations. According to Shaun McNiff, art-based research can be defined as “the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies.”¹

As Janinka Greenwood noted: “The use of arts-based approaches to research... has grown from the desire of researchers to elicit, process and share understandings and experiences that are not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches.”² Graeme Sullivan, in his book *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts*, provided a powerful argument that the creative and cultural inquiry undertaken by artists is a form of research. Sullivan argues that legitimate research goals can be achieved by choosing different methods than those offered by the social sciences. The common denominator in both approaches is the attention given to rigor and systematic inquiry.³

Interdisciplinary collaborations

A growing number of interdisciplinary collaborations are apparent between art and science but especially between art and technology, mostly due to the impact of digital technologies. Quoting Earnshaw et al: "Collaboration in art, design and media has traditionally taken place in the studio. Recent experiments in collaboration and interaction have sought to identify the factors that promote productive and creative collaboration and those that do not."⁴ Extensive literature is available on the various concepts as well as the practice of interdisciplinary collaborations. As Piibe Piirma noted: "Art and science collaboration and various hybrid research practices have become common vocabulary of the 21st century. The intertwining of different fields and paradigm change that involves scientific innovation, new technologies and historical/cultural traditions are reflected in many of the works of art that expand our imagination and provoke several questions that are important today."⁵

Collaborative Art production including hybrid projects

Today cross-disciplinary teams connect from remote locations and collaborate in hybrid environments. Within the process of these collaborations, some questions emerge, but many of these questions remain unanswered:

- How do you define the most important element of collaboration?
- What are the obstacles?
- Are there any rules?
- Is there an applicable methodology?
- How can we define the underlying artistic, social and political motivations?
- How do we approach cultural differences?
- How can technological requirements and access be best addressed in the process?
- How do the politics of spatial practices influence (remote) collaborative projects?
- How do we involve our audiences?

While extensive flexibility, modularity and mutually satisfying professional and personal relationships seem to contribute to the ultimate success of the collaborative process, many of the above points remain unresolved. My practice is based on interdisciplinary collaborations. I find that trust and respect for inter-cultural contexts are the most useful means towards a successful collaboration.

At the same time as we witness the growth of digital and data art, the wide variety of materials and instruments used today also include low-tech tools such as the glow sticks that South African artist, Marcus Neustetter, employs as a medium for storytelling. *Light Experiments: A Night beneath the Stars* created with event participants "using glow sticks, laser pointers, and strung lights"⁶ is an excellent example.

Eco art forms a new ever expanding element in today's cross-disciplinary art scene. Urban beehive projects by artists have been growing worldwide. In the centre of Brussels, the Urban Bee Laboratory operates with real time on-line video streaming, real time audio acquisition and processing from 12 microphones, pre-amps, soundcard, amplifier and speakers.⁷

Many art projects today – and I have been involved in some – utilize on-line real time data and are expressed in a great variety of forms. *The Galactic Wind* installation for example transforms cosmic ray data into water drops and sound. The scientific source for the installation is based on Cosmic Ray data from the Cosmic Ray Station at Oulu University / Sodankyla Geophysical Observatory in Finland. Our interdisciplinary team exhibited *Galactic Wind* in Puke Ariki Museum, New Zealand in 2013.⁸ At this point in time it is difficult to tell how the immense range of new formats will be viewed in the future.

Changing curatorial roles

The role of the curator has evolved, expanded in unexpected and radically different ways beyond previously un-imagined settings and conditions. In addition to the rise of new collaborative models, and on-line exhibition opportunities such as YouTube or Second Life, curatorial selections, dissemination and audience reception, have shifted considerably. The current emphasis is often on a process rather than on objects. According to Benny Wed “In the white cube, the role of the curator functions as intermediary between the art works and the public.”⁹ Corina Oprea, in her doctoral thesis *The End of The Curator: On Curatorial Acts as Collective Production of Knowledge*, explores the convoluted liaison between knowledge production, collective work and curating, through practices that have been neglected by mainstream curatorial platforms and art history.¹⁰

“There has been a lot of chatter in recent years about the »death of the curator.« But is the role of the curator really dead, or is it just evolving?” - asked Erinn Roos-Brown in his *Arts Forward* blog in May 2015. According to Roos-Brown, today the role of curating is focused on audience engagement and collaboration rather than specialized knowledge.¹¹ Could the altered curatorial practice validate Ellen Gamerman’s declaration in *The Wall Street Journal* that “Everybody’s an Art Curator”?¹² As a proof of Gamerman’s proclamation, amid the “evolving” curatorial strategies crowd curating - a relatively recent phenomenon - seems to have gained rapid popularity in major museums. The *Click* photo exhibition in 2008 by the Brooklyn Museum presented an early benchmark of this approach.¹³ Over the Web the on-line community evaluated and judged the initial submissions for *Click* with the resulting exhibition in 2008. A more recent example (October 2014–January 2015) was the *#SocialMedium* show, a “hypercontemporary exhibition” of 40 paintings chosen by public vote at the Frye Museum in Seattle.¹⁴

The traditional point of view is that the artist and the curator inhabit very different roles. Although this is the case in many situations, my

own work and that of many of my collaborators aim to break down this sharp demarcation and propose a model of cultural production that recognizes the shared ground of “certain types” of artists and curators by seeking common-ground. In my opinion we find that these days more and more time is spent as a mediator. Accordingly, the curator today is considered:

- As a champion of objects and/or interactivity,
- As a producer,
- As a collaborator,
- As a hacker,
- As a broadcaster,
- As a context provider,
- As a communicator,
- Or as an outsourcer and many more....

The impact of digital technologies:

Altered presentation and dissemination modes

The impact of new technologies is one of the most dominant influences in the changing scene of art production, presentation and dissemination. Think about wearables; a terrific example of the impact of rapidly developing technologies is the work of Anouk Wipprecht who presents “a rare combination of fashion design combined with engineering, robotics, science and interaction/ user experience design to make fashion an experience that transcends mere appearances.”¹⁵

As Alice Vincent noted: “just as the internet is capable of finding hackneyed or comically ugly art, its ubiquity in everyday life has affected the art world in ways some are comparing to the way photography changed 20th century painting.” Quoting Gregor Muir, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, Vincent wrote: “Today, most young artists are finding inspiration online, making Google as significant a technology as the camera was for the last century: Francis Bacon took images from newspapers and medical textbooks. Now artists like Parker Ito trawl the Internet for imagery. That’s an immediate difference.”¹⁶ Digital technologies - quoting Mohamed Zaher - “have expanded horizons

of creativity and opened new artistic frontiers. However the broad array of options now available to artists through new technologies may sometimes have a dangerously negative effect precisely because they offer the artists means of expression they never imagined were possible.”¹⁷

The Pew Research Center’s survey about the impact of digital technologies on the arts confirmed the major role of the Internet in broadening the boundaries of what is considered art. The survey results also corroborated the well-recognized premise “that the internet and social media have »increased engagement« and made art a more participatory experience, and that they have helped make »arts audiences more diverse«.”¹⁸

Altered presentation and dissemination modes

Another major change in the art production exhibition process is the mode of presentation. In the last few decades, the notion of exhibition sites have changed substantially. The shifting boundaries between public space and personal space have created an additional aspect of audience interactions. Today more and more artists consider moving out of the white box of museums and galleries – to public venues, streets, waterways and of course the Internet. Art presentation, like other artistic expression, has become more experimental, more conceptual; more varied and more personal noted Armand Lee in his article entitled “Art Presentation – When Walls Have Meaning.”¹⁹

The major shifts in showcases have led to a greater range, and an entirely different type of, venues and audience interaction. The variety of these on-site and on-line expressions is so vast that it is beyond the framework of this text and requires further discussion. In my practice I explored some of the presentation/audience issues through organizing informal participatory curatorial discussions and walking symposiums often as part of international festivals and conferences. These participatory events where

people can express themselves through movement or discussion are becoming very popular.

Nevertheless once again we have questions. How is consciousness (of the participant/viewer) addressed in interactive artworks? Surprisingly few artists examine in depth the social relations of the viewer with art objects. This is an intriguing point, as current technological advances clearly enable the search for enhanced communication between the artwork and the audience, providing a variety of options for an effective exploration of the state of consciousness within the interactive loop.

In conclusion - hopefully a bird’s eye view can be gained through the examples based on personal experience of the changing strategies and possibilities in contemporary art practice.

Notes

- ¹ Shaun McNiff, *Art-based research*, 2007, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.738.4618&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. See also: Shaun McNiff, *Art-based research* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998); Shaun McNiff, "Arts-based research," in J. Gary Knowles and Andra L. Cole, eds., *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: perspective, methodologies, example and issues*, 83–92. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- ² Janinka Greenwood, "Arts-Based Research: Weaving Magic and Meaning," *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 13 (Interlude 1) (2012). Retrieved [Feb 17 2021] from <http://www.ijea.org/v13i1/>. (PDF) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279371991_Arts-based_research_Weaving_magic_and_meaning.
- ³ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).
- ⁴ Rae Earnshaw, Susan Liggett and Karen Heald, "Interdisciplinary collaboration methodologies in art, design and media," 2013, https://www.academia.edu/5779593/Interdisciplinary_Collaboration_Methodologies_in_Art_Design_and_Media; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290543290_Interdisciplinary_collaboration_methodologies_in_art_design_and_media.
- ⁵ Piibe Piirma, "Foreword," in *Rhizope, Art & Science – Hybrid Art and Interdisciplinary Research*, ed., Piibe Piirma and Veronika Valk (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2014), 7. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lennart_Lennuk/publication/272087955_On_the_borderland_of_art_and_science_-_the_amazing_language_of_music_in_nature/links/54da2130cf25013d0440f05/On-the-borderland-of-art-and-science-the-amazing-language-of-music-in-nature.pdf.
- ⁶ Ann Borden, "Light Show," *Emory Magazine*, Spring 2015, http://www.emory.edu/EMORY_MAGAZINE/issues/2015/spring/register/backpage.html.
- ⁷ Urban Bee Lab, *research.annemariemaes.net*, <https://research.annemariemaes.net/doku.php>.
- ⁸ Nina Czegledy, "Galactic Wind," *ninaczegledy.net*, <http://www.ninaczegledy.net/projects/galactic-wind>.
- ⁹ Benny Wed, "How the role of the curator has changed since the 1960s," https://www.academia.edu/9672194/How_the_role_of_the_curator_has_changed_since_the_1960s.
- ¹⁰ Corina Oprea, "The End of The Curator: On Curatorial Acts as Collective Production of Knowledge" (Loughborough University, School of the Arts studentship, phd diss., 2017), <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/25605>, or https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/thesis/The_end_of_the_curator_on_curatorial_acts_as_collective_production_of_knowledge/9332957.
- ¹¹ Erinn Roos-Brown, "Is the Role of the Curator Evolving?" *artsfwd.org*, May 16, 2013, <http://artsfwd.org/changing-curators/>.
- ¹² Ellen Gamerman, "Everybody's an Art Curator," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct.23, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/everybodys-an-art-curator-1414102402>.
- ¹³ Click! A crowd-curated exhibition, Brooklyn Museum, June 27–August 10, 2008, *brooklynmuseum.org*, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/>.
- ¹⁴ #SocialMedium, Frye Museum, Seattle, October 4, 2014 – January 4, 2015, <http://fryemuseum.org/exhibition/5631/>.
- ¹⁵ Annouk Wipprecht, <http://www.anoukwipprecht.nl/#intro-1>.
- ¹⁶ Alice Vincent, 2014. "How has the Internet changed art?" *The Telegraph*, 01 October 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/11130492/How-has-the-internet-changed-art.html>.
- ¹⁷ Mohamed Zaher, "The impact of digital technologies on Art and Artists," *Midan Masr*, 2018, <http://www.midanmasr.com/en/printerfriendly.aspx?ArticleID=200>.
- ¹⁸ Kristin Thomson, Kristen Purcell and Lee Rainie, "Arts Organizations and Digital Technologies," Pew Research Center, 2013, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/04/arts-organizations-and-digital-technologies/>.
- ¹⁹ Armand Lee, "When Walls Have Meaning," *armandlee.com*, 2018, <http://armandlee.com/art-presentation-walls-meaning/>.

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